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Author(s): Marjorie Jolles

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Going Rogue: Postfeminism and the Privilege of Breaking Rules

Marjorie Jolles

The article explores the imperatives of postfeminism, specifically the dual mandates of what Shelley Budgeon (2011) calls “successful femininity”: self-invention and self-regulation. Using examples from contemporary American middlebrow fashion culture, it analyzes the way postfeminist ideology requires its subjects to fulfill these mandates by both following and breaking rules. Through this analysis, the article argues that a key feature of postfeminism is a detachment toward rules and those who follow them, which it traces to both an earlier feminist skepticism toward norms and a pronounced anxiety in middlebrow culture over femininity and individuality. It further argues that this detachment is an iteration of class privilege and is enacted through class violence, suggesting that postfeminism is above all a phenomenon of class as much as gender. Ultimately, the article argues that a postfeminist celebration of rule-breaking as a practice of successful femininity leads to inaccurate and dangerous notions of women’s agency, vividly exemplified in the figure of Sarah Palin, whose rogue affect both claims and disavows feminism.

Keywords: class / fashion / feminism / middlebrow culture / norms / postfeminism / rule-breaking / Sarah Palin / “successful femininity”

Introduction: Postfeminism’s “Successful Femininity”

To date, there is no clear consensus on what, exactly, postfeminism is. Starting in the 1980s and gaining increasingly widespread use since then, the term “postfeminism” has been defined by scholars and critics as an historical period, an attitude, a cultural field, an aesthetics, and a social policy (Holmlund 2005; McRobbie 2004, 2007; Negra 2009; Tasker and Negra 2007). Depending on whom you ask, postfeminism is either good news or bad news, as the term has

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been used to signify both the failure and success of feminism, suggestive of feminism's continuation as much as its "pastness" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 8). At the very least, we can say that postfeminism is both related to and importantly different from feminism, but how, why, and for whom this difference is claimed is a subject of ongoing analysis.

In their efforts to chart postfeminism's path and define its ideological contours, feminist scholars have tended to focus on postfeminism's circulation in popular media, as feminists have long maintained that popular culture is a primary realm where gender ideology is actively produced, consumed, negotiated, and transformed. Theorists like Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, and Shelley Budgeon, grounded primarily in feminist cultural studies, find that one of postfeminism's defining features is the cultural representation of the female subject in highly individualistic—one might say *necessarily* individualistic—terms. In a trenchant reading of postfeminism, Tasker and Negra cite its focus on "an emphatic individualism" paired with an "invented social memory of feminist language as inevitably shrill, bellicose, and parsimonious," where "feminism is constituted as an unwelcome, implicitly censorious presence" (2007, 2–3). Postfeminism, in their view, posits a feminine subject who enjoys expanded social, political, and economic opportunities thanks to an earlier feminism, but who, at the same time, scorns the constraints feminism is thought to impose on her current lifestyle. That is, postfeminism's "emphatic individualism" and disdain for feminism are necessarily linked, in that the strict rules associated with an "invented" censorious feminism serve as a foil to the perceived freedoms attributed to postfeminism, where the individual is exalted to the extent that she is autonomous, shown through defiance to norms, rules, and collectives that threaten to subdue and constrain her.

Also central to postfeminist ideology and culture is the presumption of "full economic freedom for women"; indeed, Tasker and Negra observe that "postfeminist fictions frequently set aside . . . evident economic disparities" and as a result, "postfeminism is white and middle class by default" (2). Thus, to postfeminism's combination of individualism and rejection of feminism, we may add an assumption of a particular socioeconomic class location, whereby middle-class privilege serves as the necessary ground for postfeminist subjectivity.

In numerous popular culture texts, the postfeminist subject is represented as self-made and self-reliant, the very model of what Budgeon (2011) calls "successful femininity" for our current "culture of the self that endorses self-invention, autonomy and personal responsibility" (284). This culture of the self occurs in a larger context of neoliberalism that has been ascendant since the 1980s, which has entailed widespread dismantling of state policies and programs that acknowledge and attempt to redress social and economic disparities. This neoliberal milieu celebrates defunding of the welfare state, privatization, and free markets "as proof of social egalitarianism and opportunity" (Tasker and Negra

2007, 6), whereby “personal responsibility” is the solution to socioeconomic disadvantage. In this way, a neoliberal culture of the self enables a dual fantasy of rampant individualism and a universal middle class, possible if everyone would only take care of themselves. In its adherence to middle-class norms of self-care, neoliberalism thus mirrors and sustains the same postfeminist imperatives of self-management required for female success. Nancy Fraser (2009) has identified this marriage of neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies as “elaborating a new romance of female advancement and gender justice” (110).

Injunctions to self-invention and personal responsibility in postfeminist sensibilities of the successful female self produce a rich tension in this brand of individualism, requiring the self to be at once expressive and managerial—equally invested in innovation and self-discipline to create a self at once novel and legible. Executing such a feat requires what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) calls “a feel for the game,” an intuitive grasp of the norms and expectations of the various social fields in which one functions (61). Indeed, successful femininity in postfeminist terms amounts to a formula for selfhood that calls for a complex engagement with social rules, allowing for novelty to signal uniqueness though constrained by adherence to dominant norms of respectability and intelligibility. The result is that self-invention may be in potential conflict with, tempered by, or even, for some, in the service of self-regulation.

The tension the postfeminist subject faces between expression and constraint corresponds to the tension inherent in contemporary fashion culture, where women are expected to simultaneously express themselves and manage a normative gender performance. Fashion has long captured the attention of feminist scholars, who see it as a crucial sphere of subject-formation, where bodies, ideology, history, and material culture intersect (Kaiser 2001; Parkins 2008; Radner 1998). Precisely because of its role in the social production of individual and group identity, fashion provides a useful inroad for feminist analysis of cultural ideologies, fantasies, and anxieties reflected in its trends and discourses. Fashion lends itself especially well as a site for analyzing these postfeminist “imperatives of subjectivity” (Skeggs 2004, 292), as style is a primary resource for displaying both self-invention and self-regulation and is thus an inherently ethical domain, as well as an aesthetic one.

In an effort to further define just whom postfeminism and its attendant notions of successful femininity serve and exclude, to elaborate the ways postfeminism both links to and breaks with feminism, and to highlight how class enables postfeminist identity, this article explores the dual mandates of self-invention and self-regulation in postfeminist fashion culture, specifically in the figure of the fashion rule-breaker. I argue that a central feature of postfeminism, as embodied in the fashion rule-breaker, is its simultaneous investment in and detachment from social norms and those who follow them. This attitude toward norms and the normal reveals a form of class violence within postfeminism, suggesting that postfeminism is a formation of class as much as gender.

I claim that postfeminism's various strands—emphatic individuality, disdain for feminism, and middle-class privilege—are not merely coincidental for the postfeminist subject. Rather, they are necessary and co-constituting features of postfeminist identity and culture, suggesting a strong linkage between middle-class individualism and hostility toward rules. I contend that both middle-class individualism and hostility toward rules rely on gendered notions of taste and distinction. To make this argument, I first present a collection of examples of rhetoric and images celebrating female rule-breaking that circulate in middle-brow fashion culture to demonstrate the predominance of postfeminist ideology in popular culture. I then provide an analysis of the well-known rule-breaking rhetoric of Sarah Palin, a figure who circulates outside of fashion culture but who, in engaging in the same postfeminist affective performativity as the fashion rule-breaker, exemplifies postfeminism's most dangerous dimensions as they resonate in a larger cultural sphere. Although I situate my study of female rule-breaking primarily in contemporary fashion culture, I show that the figure of the female rule-breaker has significance far beyond the sphere of fashion, in order to reveal the inherently political dimensions of a rogue feminine affect.

Fashion Rules and Rule-Breakers

An analysis of contemporary mainstream fashion culture shows a marked preoccupation with the discourse of rules, deployed according to postfeminist logics of success via self-regulation, since one of the most effective ways one can demonstrate self-regulation is by demonstrating adherence to accepted rules of self-presentation. An obvious example of a cultural text that endorses the rules of successful femininity by endorsing the rules of fashion is the hugely popular fashion/lifestyle makeover reality television show *What Not to Wear*. Originating in 2001 in the UK on the BBC and spinning off into an American version on the Learning Channel in 2003, *What Not to Wear* follows a simple premise: a pair of fashion experts (Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine in the BBC version, and Stacy London and Clinton Kelly on the Learning Channel) come to the rescue of ordinary private citizens deemed in need of a makeover by teaching them the rules of proper dress, grooming, and personal style. The subjects of *What Not to Wear* are frequently represented as sloppy, unfashionable, and ignorant or resistant to middle-class codes of personal style, woefully lacking a “feel for the game” that the experts intuitively possess.

McRobbie (2004) describes the interactions between the victims and experts on *What Not to Wear* as a form of “symbolic violence,” in which “what emerges is a new regime of more sharply polarized class positions, shabby failure or well-groomed success” (101). Coined by Bourdieu (1984), “symbolic violence” describes the method by which “dominant groups endeavor to impose their own life-style . . . sparked off by class hatred or contempt” (511). The struggle by which such class differentiation and antagonism are performed rarely invokes

class directly; rather, it occurs through the more symbolic and subtle codes of style and discourses of good and bad taste. Indeed, symbolic violence is a form of “terrorism . . . which, in the name of taste, condemn[s] to ridicule, indignity, shame, silence . . . men and women who simply fall short . . . of the right way of being and doing” (ibid.). In this struggle, the mastery of rules—of fashion, taste, proper subjectivity, and thus, ultimately, of social class—distinguish the expert from the victim. Through a rhetoric of fashion rules, shows like *What Not to Wear* perform class-based symbolic violence precisely in the way they do not explicitly call attention to class. Instead, rules of fashion and grooming, and repeated references to good taste, stand in for bourgeois norms of propriety and respectability. Providing instruction to *What Not to Wear*’s subjects by invoking rules like “fat arms must always wear sleeves” permits the show to “suppress the class-based nature of its taste hierarchies,” while still enforcing them (Roberts 2007, 235). The symbolic violence committed here is in the implicit gesture to “problem” bodies; while fashion rules would seem to impart universally applicable advice, what actually occurs when fashion rules are deployed is the policing of less respectable body-types, where respectability is often coded through class.

Without diminishing the role of rules in maintaining respectable femininity, I claim that postfeminism’s dual imperatives for successful femininity—self-invention and self-regulation—are fulfilled not simply by following rules, but also by breaking them in strategic and knowing ways. The mandate toward self-invention that constitutes an essential aspect of postfeminist successful femininity must be met with a display of individualism that may be at odds with strict adherence to fashion rules. Contemporary texts of fashion culture mirror the tension in postfeminist forms of individualism that demand novelty as well as legibility. Thus, the fashion rule-breaker seems to appear as frequently as the rule-follower, as the following body of material, collected from middlebrow fashion culture and presented here, shows.

“Go Ahead! Break These Rules!” demands *InStyle* magazine (2009), urging us to “kick ‘Don’t’ to the curb and free your style” (186–87). In this example, rules are posited as an obstacle to style as a form of self-invention. A recent issue of *Elle* magazine (2010) applauds actress Kristen Stewart for “land[ing] on top by breaking all of Hollywood’s rules” (20), while a 2009 feature in *O, The Oprah Magazine* applauds style-icon Lauren Hutton for “forg[ing] a new freedom for women” who tells the reader “[t]o go by the rules is absurd” (Hutton, qtd. in Weissman and Hochwald 191). Here, rules of fashion are meant for the unsuccessful, the weak, and the unfree; success, strength, and freedom are performed in the defiance of rules. Indeed, we might say that style is understood as autonomy from rules. Sharing space with these editorials are advertisements that also celebrate the allure of the iconoclast. An ad from Style & Company pictures a beaming woman in a printed wrap dress boasting that “I have my own dress code. I wear what I want,” suggesting that norms of style—dress codes—are for those lacking desire and confidence or, in essence, those lacking strong

subjectivity. Directly invoking the familiar “Dos-and-Don’ts” paradigm of style pedagogy common to middlebrow magazines like *Glamour*, Juicy Couture’s ad for its Couture Couture perfume commands us to “Do the Don’ts.” Such examples highlight the emphatic individuality of postfeminism, in which self-invention seems to take precedence over self-regulation.

This celebration of fashion rule-breaking seems to directly contradict the *What Not to Wear* moral code, in which breaking rules is the very cause of the victim’s failure to achieve the successful femininity of postfeminism. The fashion rule-breaking described in the examples above instead invokes a rogue femininity, in which individuality is equated with defiance of, and mastery over, rules—characteristic of what Cressida J. Heyes (2007) calls a “heroic discourse of style” (134). But on *What Not to Wear*, shame, not celebration, is the appropriate response to rule-breaking, and this shame is the primary mechanism of the “symbolic violence” and class antagonisms on which the show, and postfeminism itself, depend. The rule-breaker on *What Not to Wear* knows she has failed, and the shame of her failure renders her docile enough to be educated into the norms of proper (middle-class, white, heterosexual) style. The name of the game on *What Not to Wear* (and surely elsewhere) is conformity to middle-class norms, not defiance of them.

The Problem with Norms

This conflict between following and violating norms reflects the same tension that this article explores: postfeminism’s requirement that female subjects both self-invent and self-regulate. If rule-following is an effective means for demonstrating the self-regulation required for postfeminist success, how, then, to make sense of the cultural capital that attaches to the rule-breaker? To answer this question, first we must understand that one of the ways that the postfeminist’s successful femininity is achieved and supported is through the subject’s paradoxical relation to cultural norms: relying upon them to perform middle-class respectability and self-regulation, but self-consciously flouting them to display uniqueness in postfeminism’s logic that reads defiance as self-invention. Norms themselves are somewhat paradoxical, in that they simultaneously establish the normal and the deviant, the same and the different. In organizing and regulating social hierarchies, norms function to make some identities intelligible by making others unintelligible. As social codes and rules, norms assign varying degrees of moral value to rule-following and rule-breaking behavior, thereby determining the power available to the subjects who enact it. In perhaps the most vexing aspect of normativity, norms produce uniformity and encourage conformity, which takes on positive connotations when rule-following is the mark of self-regulation, and negative connotations when self-invention requires the cultivation of a unique, anti-normative individualism.

The unstable character and shifting value of uniformity generates the play of normativity at the heart of postfeminism. As a descendant of feminism, postfeminism derives some of its ambivalence toward social norms by relying on a critique of norms and normalization belonging to a robust feminist tradition. Influential feminist texts of the twentieth century vehemently and repeatedly call out the oppressive effects of dominant gender norms, citing the limitations on women's freedoms enforced by widespread rules of female behavior instructing women to defer, subordinate themselves, and cultivate a style of passivity in order to support norms of masculinity that emphasize agency, entitlement, and primary status (Bartky 1990; de Beauvoir 1989). In highlighting the crucial roles that norms play in the social construction of gender, feminist insights into normalization risk being interpreted as a condemnation of norms themselves, characterizing normalization as an inherently oppressive process—a problematic claim, in that it ignores the enabling and productive nature of some norms to give meaning and shape to identity and experience. (For example, we obey norms when we communicate in language, and we often experience language as primarily enabling for meaning-making, not oppressive.) I find that this is one way that postfeminism corrupts the insights of feminism, taking a critique of *certain* dangerous norms to conclusions that careful feminist theorists themselves do not reach: that *all* norms only and always oppress.

Normalization is, in actual practice, not merely a constraining phenomenon, nor is it simply a process of erasing those attributes that make an individual unique. The uniformity enabled by norms should not be mistaken as only a kind of social cloning. As Michel Foucault's (1997) incisive work on normalization reveals, the constraining power of norms paradoxically works to support the process of subject-formation, whereby adherence to norms produces the effect of legible subjective interiority and respectability. In Heyes's (2007) Foucauldian reading of normalization's logics, normalization is "a set of mechanisms for sorting, taxonomizing, measuring, managing, and controlling populations, which both fosters conformity *and generates modes of individuality*" (16; emphasis added). Individuality is therefore not at odds with processes of normalization and social construction; instead, we must understand normalization as the very milieu in which individuality is enacted and perceived. Understanding normalcy and individuality as simultaneous enactments, rather than being mutually exclusive, explains how one can accomplish postfeminism's puzzling dual imperatives of self-regulation and self-invention. The middle class, as a socioeconomic and cultural location as well as an identity, demands conformity to social conventions, while it also demands individuality and is thus the space where such a feat is possible. Being normal promises respectability, and, as its effect, the freedom to be oneself.

This may help explain why self-invention and self-regulation are often difficult to parse, in that norms play a role in both. Those with the blessings of

class privilege—who have an intuitive “feel for the game”—are not at risk of losing their respectability and thus have more freedom to play at self-invention by breaking rules, taking self-regulation for granted. Those who have failed to secure the respectability that comes with class privilege may perhaps take fewer risks with self-invention, and pursue their self-invention through obedient self-regulation—rule-following—instead. Ultimately, the postfeminist subject is distinguished not by the specific norms she obeys or rejects, but by her detached *attitude toward* norms themselves and those who follow them. To take such a stance toward norms—needing them for basic respectability, but declaring independence from them to perform uniqueness—is to enact distance from the necessity of rules to provide social security or, in essence, to perform class privilege.

Rule-Breaking’s Symbolic Violence

Far from liberating its subjects, a postfeminist complaint against norms and those who follow them commits its own symbolic violence. The rule-breaker may be a figure of strong individuality, but the achievement of this individualism relies on the fundamentally relational structure of her subjectivity; for the rule-breaker is only intelligible by virtue of the existence of masses of rule-followers against whom she defines and measures herself. In *InStyle*’s “Rule Breakers We Love” series, the authenticity of actress Ginnifer Goodwin is revealed through a comparison between Goodwin and those who lack either her courage or her enlightenment. The copy reads: “unlike many young actresses who cling to classic glamour as their photo-op security blanket, Goodwin regards each red carpet as an uncharted path on which to take chances” (Bryan, Jenkins, and Schmid 2009). In a 2011 feature called “The Age Defiers” in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, we are told—with an irony revealing that rule-breaking has its own norms of success and failure—that “there’s a right way to break any rule” (101), suggesting that not all rule-breaking will be celebrated and that the demand for middle-class respectability haunts the rule-breaker as well. One rule-breaker in the feature defends her unconventional long hair by observing: “I see so many women my age with the same short, layered hair. But *I want to be me*” (106; emphasis in original). This rule-breaker’s strong subjectivity invokes and relies upon the weak subjectivity of the rule-follower, where “me” is inherently different from and, thus, inherently superior to her peers, valuable to the degree to which she is distinct from the bland sameness of “so many women [her] age.”

This necessary antagonism toward the sameness of the rule-bound masses is a repeated trope in fashion editorials. *Glamour* magazine’s “Dos, Don’ts, News & Views” feature singles out “Drew Barrymore’s Kooky Style” (2009), observing approvingly that “[i]n a sea of same-hair, same-dress, same-style clones, she’s a wackadoo original. Love that” (98). In an interesting twist, note that Barrymore’s “kooky” style is a definite “Do,” revealing a wonderful paradox of

fashion: the dialectical nature of Dos and Don'ts that collapse into themselves, such that a Don't look done the right way is the quintessential Do. The fashion rule-breaker enacts both self-invention and self-regulation in this performance, showing that she knows the rules of good taste so well—in fact has an excess of taste that permits her to violate those rules and enhance, rather than weaken, her style. Her exceptionalism manifests in her ability to manipulate the rules to her will, rather than having her will constrained by the rules.

By enacting, through style, a distance from fashion's rules, the rule-breaker possesses what Amanda Anderson (2006) has called "aggrandized agency," whereby the rule-breaker demonstrates a "detached understanding of the very ideological formations" that produce her as if she is "exempted from networks of power" (47). Those networks of power might include the social norms of a given historical moment, including the norms of gender stylization and embodiment. As Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity makes clear, variation on norms is inevitable; what I wish to highlight is not the unavoidable proliferation of difference when subjects play with rules, but rather the emphatic discourse of aggrandized agency that equates knowing and breaking rules with the achievement of both the self-regulation and the self-invention necessary for successful femininity. I also call attention to the class privilege associated with the exempt status afforded by aggrandized agency, as social and ideological distancing is often only available to those without clear need for attachment to collectivity and history. Such distancing is emblematic of the neoliberal character of postfeminism, where collectivity is eschewed in favor of individuality.

Still, to knowingly break a rule is not to be detached from it, but instead heavily invested in—indeed governed by—it. As *Glamour's* suggestion that we all emulate Barrymore's one-of-a-kind style proves, the most unique, iconoclastic look is always a minute away from its own normalization through mass consumption. And lest we imagine personal style to be entirely self-made, Foucault (1997) reminds us that one's efforts at style are "not something invented by the individual himself [*sic*]. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (291; qtd. in Radner 1998, 351). This insight does not neutralize the value and pleasure we may take in breaking some rules, but it does significantly soften the triumphalist claims to social transcendence that attend rule-breaking behavior.

Class and Gender Antagonisms of Middlebrow Culture

The postfeminist contempt for the masses expressed in celebrations of rule-breaking suggests an intersectional conception of the postfeminist subject's gender as inherently classed. In the case of fashion rule-breaking, the antagonism between rule-breakers and rule-followers can be explained through an

examination of the classed and gendered struggle characteristic of middlebrow culture. The middlebrow has been variously defined, as well as championed and condemned, by diverse critics since at least the early twentieth century (Rubin 1992, xii–xv). What emerges as one of the most salient characteristics of middlebrow culture is its pedagogical function, its ability to circulate expertise—typically stored in the upper echelons of culture—to those in the lower classes, who ostensibly require instruction in becoming cultured. Whether explicitly stated or implicitly suggested, middlebrow culture’s job is to teach its consumers how to have taste (Radway 1994; Rubin 1992). In a neoliberal setting, in which individuality is compulsory for all subjects, middlebrow culture has an especially powerful role to play, paying deliberate attention to the project of self-improvement: the self working on itself through the active cultivation of style and taste. In short, middlebrow culture is a heavily didactic sphere, a site of advice and the how-to, whereby expertise in selfhood is deployed by experts who exude individualism, which is received by members of the undifferentiated masses. Note, for instance, the proliferation of instruction in the middlebrow domain of self-help, of which Oprah Winfrey’s “live your best life” mandate is a prime example (Jolles 2007). Middlebrow culture is thus an ideal site of post-feminist experiments in successful femininity, for it responds to the subject’s dual needs for both self-invention and self-regulation.

The examples of fashion rule-breaking described above originate from middlebrow women’s magazines, texts that serve an explicitly pedagogical function in the teaching of self-invention and self-regulation. It is worth noting that one does not find “Dos and Don’ts” features in, say, *Vogue* or *W*, as rules of fashion, and of successful femininity more generally, are intuitive in highbrow culture, but must be explicitly taught in middlebrow, aspirational texts like *Glamour*, *What Not to Wear*, and *InStyle*.

Middlebrow culture facilitates the very antagonisms it is ostensibly meant to resolve precisely by functioning as the “middle ground” between authoritative knowledge and ignorance, where cultural capital is transacted (Bariess 2010; Cardiff 1988). In her work on the Book-of-the-Month Club, Janice Radway (1994) points to the contests over agency, taste, and individuality that occur in those spaces that belong neither to high nor low culture, but instead mediate between them, marrying mass consumerism with the project of developing taste (871). Consumers of middlebrow culture are accused by their critics of lacking the rationality to choose for themselves, and needing to buy taste rather than having their own, autonomous style (873). Critics of middlebrow culture lament that “we have become a nation of copy-cats” (Russell 1926, 170, qtd. in Radway 1994, 877), a herd of indiscriminating rule-followers who must be “force-fed” (880) their culture. As much as middlebrow culture embraces the masses, it is also plagued by a subtle anxiety surrounding the mass-ness of mass culture. In these denigrations, the middlebrow subject-consumer is feminized and infantilized, and lacks, by definition, the strong will and class differentiation that the

expert has. Recall the description of Goodwin's rule-breaking style, describing other "young actresses who cling to classic glamour as their photo-op security blanket," assigning childlike, insecure, weak subjectivity to the herd against whom Goodwin stands out, not unlike those pitiable consumers who must be "force-fed" taste and culture (Bryan, Jenkins, and Schmid 2009). Consider the pejorative discourse of sameness invoked in *Glamour's* (2009) celebration of Barymore's style: those "same-hair, same-dress, same-style clones" bear a striking resemblance to the "nation of copy-cats" derided by opponents of middlebrow culture, quoted above. In their dependence, passivity, undifferentiation, and obedience to external authorities of taste, the popular classes who constitute the middlebrow market are figured as an amorphous, non-individuated, feminine mass against the masculine figure of the discerning, savvy consumer "characterized . . . by self-mastery and active agency, the particular subject . . . valorized by bourgeois culture" (Radway 1994, 888).

The contempt for rule-bound women in postfeminist fashion culture mirrors the misogynist antagonisms of middlebrow culture, whereby the ignorance associated with lower-class identity is conflated with the weakness and immature subjectivity of the feminine. This same problematic misogyny circulates in the critique of middlebrow fashion consumers, those rule-bound women who cannot think for themselves. For, despite the dominance of rules in *What Not to Wear* and the "Dos and Don'ts" of *Glamour*, what obedient rule-followers have in excess is not only conformity, but *femaleness*—a failure of self-invention, or what we might call "unsuccessful femininity" in postfeminist logics of success. Thus, moral panics over the lack of originality in middlebrow fashion culture can be understood as enacting a cultural "anxiety about agency" (877) on an "ideological battlefield . . . over women's social position" (872) in a world changed by both feminism and neoliberalism, and its offspring, postfeminism. These misogynistic conceptions of femininity—weakness, dependence, lack of authority, lack of differentiation from the herd—are kept alive by postfeminism's scorn for the woman who lets herself get bossed around, whether by feminists or by others. The rule-breaker goes rogue when less individuated women would play it safe by playing by the rules.

Middlebrow culture provides a site for negotiating cultural anxieties surrounding individual autonomy, which explains why rule-breaking, understood as an assertion of autonomy, is both valorized and prohibited in middlebrow culture. Thus, rather than conceiving of middlebrow culture as a monolithic space where norms are only either obeyed or violated, this analysis suggests that middlebrow culture is instead a site of active ambivalence vis-à-vis norms, where the project of subject-formation is enabled by playing nonconformity off conformity. This stylistic option is only available to some, however.

Postfeminist Anti-Feminism

In the examples of fashion rule-breaking described above, notice the subtle contempt directed at the rule-bound woman for being part of a herd, for failing to be an individual, for relying on normative codes of style for expressing herself. She plays by the script, does not deviate, is not liberated. In her conformity, she is unknowing, uncool, and unfun, against the sexy heroism of the rule-breaker. This construction of the rule-breaker's rule-following Other reveals the workings of a postfeminist "movement beyond feminism to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves" (McRobbie 2007, 33). This freedom and comfort depends on positing "'lesser' femininities . . . outside of postfeminist categories of value" and resulting in "a sense of glee about 'getting one over' on censorious feminists" (Negra 2009, 10). But postfeminism is more than feminism's backlash; rather, postfeminism is a complex repudiation of feminism that also *includes* feminism (McRobbie 2007, 27–28). Postfeminism describes a world in which many feminist gains are now woven into the fabric of everyday life, and where one can trace a genealogy of the language of choice and individual empowerment so characteristic of postfeminism—in addition to a critique of norms as oppressive—to an earlier feminist movement. So while feminism has become "common sense" (28) and postfeminist culture celebrates the defiant woman who will not be bossed around, the *idea* of feminism as a set of strict, unforgiving rules has garnered real contempt due precisely to the postfeminist conception of norms as constraints on individual will. Ultimately, in its genealogical relation to feminism, postfeminism represents a dilemma, for, as Budgeon (2011) observes, "making a positive identification with feminism threatens to rupture a carefully constructed narrative of self-determination" (286). Budgeon goes on to observe that women who achieve postfeminist successful femininity must demonstrate "*independence* from a collective identification with gender or feminism" (288; emphasis in original).

Indeed, we might understand the postfeminist hostility toward feminism as yet another instance of a postfeminist hostility toward norms. If feminism is (wrongly) construed as, simply, resistance to rules, then, ironically, it takes on a normative, repressive character of its own. This leaves feminism open to rejection on similar anti-normative grounds, paving the way for a seductive postfeminist ethos of individualism that characterizes collective identity on the basis of gender as a force of oppressive conformity. Postfeminism functions by enforcing rules of successful femininity, but also revels in breaking feminism's rules—and owes that very rule-breaking spirit to an earlier feminism that has been evacuated of much of its political content, such that only a rogue affect remains. Rule-breaking thus announces one's agency to live without a movement, apart from the herd.

It is indeed an irony that feminism can signify both breaking from the herd *and* the herd itself. But such is precisely the nature of a postfeminist culture

that turns feminism into a moving target, indebted to feminism for enabling the aggrandized agency of postfeminist subjects who, in possession of such agency, are contemptuous of feminism for its normalizing rules. Charlotte Brunsdon (2005) has identified this impulse as an essential feature of feminism, what she calls “disidentity—not being like that, not being like other women, not being like those images of women” (112). The postfeminist subject, informed yet bored by feminism, chafes at subordinating her style—and her lifestyle—to rules she did not invent. She enacts her disidentity with other women through breaking rules to achieve an individuality that eludes the poor, rule-bound masses.

Rule-Breaking as Privilege

It is, of course, one thing to break the rules out of ignorance—as is the case on *What Not to Wear*—and quite another to break them because one knows them well enough, and is socially privileged enough, to break them. *What Not to Wear*'s victims are not authorized to break rules, whereas its experts are, by virtue of the authority attached to their class privilege. This is not only a phenomenon of class, but of race as well. Richard Dyer (1997) has identified this very privilege as a hallmark of whiteness, “the right not to conform, to be different and get away with it” (12). Budgeon (2011) observes that “maintaining a coherent empowerment narrative consisting of autonomy, individuality and personal choice requires a denial of the effects that external influences have on the realization of individual success,” and as a result, “the classed and raced constitution of the ‘successful’ feminine subject is obscured” (285). Postfeminist representations of women as active, masterful subjects—made free through feminism’s gains or, alternately, freed from feminism’s repressive grip, depending on your point of view—are accomplished through seductive cultural narratives of women’s lives that bear no traces of racial, class, or even gender difference. Tasker and Negra (2007) observe that postfeminism is “a strategy by which . . . social difference [is] glossed over” (2), whereby the erasure of meaningful markers of group identity further support the strong individualism and anti-normative affect of the postfeminist subject. And while numerous critics have identified this resistance to collectivity on the part of the postfeminist subject, I contend that this strong, rather anti-social individualism is the form that self-invention takes for the postfeminist. That is, the postfeminist is not just *represented* as bourgeois in postfeminist texts; she actively *enacts* this class status by performing her distance from the necessity of the rules and norms of sociality. This would seem to suggest that bourgeois privilege is not an incidental feature of postfeminism but essential to it, in that the postfeminist subject becomes legible as an individual only through this detachment.

One of the most confounding consequences of the success of twentieth-century feminism has been the increased confusion over what difference differences ought to make. According to postfeminist reasoning, feminism has

succeeded in achieving gender equality, which has led, contradictorily, to a cultural emphasis on gender's irrelevance (Budgeon 2011, 285). If gender is no longer a basis for discrimination, then gender may no longer be said to be a meaningful ground of collective identity. This is one way in which postfeminism appears hostile to acknowledging difference—in this case, gender difference—and favors the aggrandized agency of the individual instead. Moreover, the twentieth-century feminist attention to women's access to professional success may also have supported an uncritical celebration of individual success. In their introduction to *Third Wave Agenda*, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997) acknowledge the contradictory nature of the individualism so characteristic of third-wave (and, I would add, post-) feminist subjects, pointing out that this individualism is “a legacy of the Reagan 1980s,” while also observing that “second wave [feminism] . . . made ambition a realizable possibility for women” (5). That is, to understand how we have arrived at the competitive individualism and exceptionalism of postfeminism, we must not think of feminism as removed from the capitalist and neoliberal ideologies of the past few decades, but rather as being strongly influenced by them (Fraser 2009).

Rethinking Agency: Going Rogue?

Postfeminist and feminist ideologies are often difficult to distinguish from each other due to the ways that both grapple with questions of women's agency. It is tempting, both for feminist and postfeminist aims, to conceive of women's self-invention as equivalent to defiance. If norms are posited as only repressive and not also enabling—that is, if norms are thought to serve only self-regulation but not also self-invention—then agency tends to be understood as always inherently anti-normative. Saba Mahmood (2001) argues that this is one of the most problematic blind spots of Western feminist theorizing, to conflate agency with “resistance to social norms” (208). In such a formulation, aggrandized agency is the most legible form of women's power according to both (Western) feminist and postfeminist logics, and consequently, following rules, customs, and traditions is synonymous with failing to exert the meaningful agency required of self-invention. For in the individualist milieu in which postfeminism thrives, subjectivity is not legible as self-invented without some display of difference from others. But surely one exerts agency when one enacts tradition, and just as surely, one is not always exerting meaningful agency by taking a stance of refusal. Mahmood's point is that disruption is not always the form agency takes; agency may also be exercised in acts that “aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability” (212). For agency to be meaningful, it need not only be risky, dangerous, or oppositional, nor must it be inherently innovative or anti-normative. The reluctance of Western feminism to construe agency outside of mere defiance illuminates a genealogy of feminism to postfeminism, in that the blind spots of Western feminism that equate disruptive behavior with agency produce the

fertile ground for postfeminist affectations of defiance that serve, rather than undermine, symbolic violence among women.

The postfeminist rule-breaker par excellence who has remained nameless until now—but whose ethos I invoke throughout this article—is, of course, former Alaska governor and 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. While not known for breaking fashion rules per se (but, in fact, securing respectability by following fashion rules), Palin has made rule-breaking part of her appeal to authenticity by describing herself as a Washington outsider willing to defy powerful interests—the GOP establishment, oil companies, the media—in order to be herself (Palin 2009).¹

As is well known by now, Palin was accused of “going rogue” by John McCain’s staff when she became disobedient and undisciplined in the final months of the 2008 presidential campaign. In a shrewd act of transvaluation, Palin’s subsequent best-selling narrative of the campaign, *Going Rogue: An American Life* (2009), packaged her defiance as her virtue, not her vice. Tapping into a postfeminist culture that loves a feisty woman who will not be tamed but hates an actual feminist, Sarah “Barracuda” Palin (as she was known on her high school basketball team and again during the campaign) shows both the intense appeal and profound limitations of rule-breaking as a signifier of agency. Palin’s style of postfeminist successful femininity rehearses the structure of other postfeminist narratives, where women demonstrate empowerment through a reflexive rejection of rules and rule-followers.

Palin’s celebration of her own rogue style extends beyond her defense of her behavior during the campaign as chronicled in *Going Rogue*. Although she describes herself as a “direct beneficiary” of past feminist gains (29), she has taken repeated aim at contemporary feminists and feminism, exemplifying postfeminism’s ambivalent stance toward feminisms past and present. More specifically, it is Palin’s deft conflation of feminism with harsh rules—a rhetorical move not unique to her, unfortunately—that consolidates the emancipatory appeal of a postfeminist affect of self-invention and self-control.

In a public, media-driven quarrel in 2010 with the pro-choice political-action committee EMILY’s List, Palin performed postfeminism’s distaste for radicalism when she tweeted: “Who hijacked term: ‘feminist?’ A cackle of rads who want 2 crucify other women w/ whom they disagree on a singular issue; it’s ironic (& passé)” (qtd. in Newell 2010). Here, Palin performs a postfeminist detachment from normativity by warning against a feminism that she constructs as threatening to normalize its subjects by requiring adherence to a singular ideology. In this formulation, feminism’s problem is clearly its demands for conformity, affirming Budgeon’s (2011) observation that “[p]ostfeminist popular discourses continue to suggest that feminism places limits on women’s ability to construct their own identities in ways they feel best suit their circumstances” (288). Palin also invokes postfeminism’s insistence on feminism’s “pastness,” such that the charge of being passé signals a failure of innovation, intended to

shame (mirroring the moral logics of fashion, where the new is superior to the old). What could have been a debate about reproductive policy turned into a contest over who is more free: the mama grizzly who dares to think for herself, or the passé feminist who has had her own brain washed and now wants to tell you what to think. Tests of feminine authenticity like this that foreground an affect of rule-breaking function to depoliticize actual feminist gains, rendering the political ultimately, simply, personal. I am certainly not the first to observe the irony in the fact that Palin boasts a rule-breaking bravado meant to endow her with authentic, empowered femininity, while advocating for policies that would significantly divest masses of women of actual power. In so doing, Palin typifies Negra's (2009) observation that postfeminism "fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits" (4).

Palin's ambiguous relation to the masses may be one of the secrets of her success, whereby she manages to marshal postfeminism's seductive discourse of freedom from rules while also endowing the masses with moral superiority, and locating herself among them. Unlike the middlebrow subject who requires instruction in proper subjectivity in order to individuate from the masses, Palin's defiance comes in the form of rejecting the cultural authority of the experts while defending the masses (Leibovich 2011). And yet, Palin's populist rhetoric of rule-breaking conceals the fact that she is no longer a member of the masses whom she claims to represent.

Although this article is not about Palin predominantly, she deserves mention as a highly visible, influential exemplar of the same seductive rule-breaking rhetoric circulating in fashion culture. Indeed, we can only call this shift of focus I have made from fashion iconoclasts to political mavericks a detour if we understand fashion and politics as separate spheres. But one aim of this article is to emphasize the relevance of fashion studies as a resource for critical feminist analysis of social longings, anxieties, and, especially, shifting gender ideologies. The trend of celebrating the rule-breaker appears to be one such shift in how we understand an emerging female subject of postfeminism, where feminine agency necessarily entails disidentification from other women, where every heroic "Do" relies on the existence of some pitiable, passé "Don't."

Fashion is a normative game, and feminists have argued for a long time that violating its rules can represent resistance to an insidious form of control. The history of liberation movements is, among other things, a history of highly political, highly consequential fashion rule-breaking (to wit: the peace movement's androgynous masculinity, feminists' fight to wear pants where only dresses are allowed, and the Afro's role in the civil rights struggle). So this is not an argument for or against breaking fashion rules, but a challenge to the equation of rule-breaking with agency, and an investigation into what the postfeminist requires for success. Or, more specifically, *whom* she requires—namely, some lesser, "unsuccessful" other woman.

At stake in the ideological struggle between feminism and postfeminism is the subject's relation to norms. A distinctive feature of postfeminism is its imperative to transcend the constraints of the social, which norms and rules represent. Postfeminism may have inherited its hostility toward norms from an uncritical (Western) feminism that equates norms with repression, but if we are concerned with distinguishing a dangerous postfeminism from a robust and progressive feminism, we might use the emergence of a figure like Palin as an opportunity to redefine feminism as neither a disciplinary ideology nor an antagonist of all things normative and normal. Instead, we might affirm feminism's acceptance of social construction as a given fact of experience, and direct our energies toward producing more just social conditions under which we would self-invent and self-manage. This distinction is of utmost importance when we realize that rule-breakers charm Americans, seducing us with their defiance of the social toward anything but emancipatory ends.

Marjorie Jolles is an associate professor of women's and gender studies at Roosevelt University, where she teaches courses on fashion theory, philosophy of the body, global feminist ethics, and feminist philosophy. Her research brings together Continental philosophy and feminist cultural studies, with particular focus on popular rhetorics of feminine authenticity, cultural imperatives toward self-help, and styles of embodiment. She is coeditor of Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style (2012). Her work has appeared in The Oprah Phenomenon (2007), and in the journals Hypatia, Critical Matrix, and Feminist Teacher. She can be reached at mjolles@roosevelt.edu.

Note

1. Palin and her family made news when it was revealed that the Republican National Committee spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for a fashion makeover for the family's national debut during the 2008 nominating convention, suggesting that respectability for the Palin family through normative fashion might have enhanced Palin's maverick appeal.

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